

Cyanobacteria and Algal Blooms



What are cyanobacteria?

Cyanobacteria, also known as blue-green algae, are tiny, plant-like organisms that live in lakes, streams, and reservoirs and use sunlight to grow.

What are algal blooms?

Algal blooms are rapid, large overgrowths of cyanobacteria. They often form a visible scum on the surface of the water. During blooms, cyanobacteria may produce toxins that can pose a health risk to people, pets, and other animals.

How can I tell if there's a harmful algal bloom?

Water experiencing an algal bloom may look like pea soup, green or blue paint, or have a scum layer or mats/foam floating on the surface. The water may also appear in shades of green, blue-green, yellow, brown, or red.

What are cyanotoxins?

Certain species of cyanobacteria can produce cyanotoxins that can cause skin irritation and other harmful health effects. Cyanotoxins can be present at any time during a bloom. Testing the water for the presence of toxins is the only reliable method for confirming their presence during a harmful algal bloom.

What kind of harmful effects can I expect from cyanotoxins?

The most common responses to exposure are gastrointestinal illnesses and skin irritation, although some toxins can cause liver, neurological, or respiratory problems.

Are children at greater risk than adults?

Yes, children can experience more severe symptoms due to their smaller body size.

What can I do to protect myself?

The best way to protect yourself is to stay out of the water and avoid any contact with water or scums.

What can I do to protect my pets?

Dogs are especially at risk, since they may swim in and swallow water contaminated with cyanobacteria and their body size is smaller. If a pet swallows a large amount of water and begins acting strangely, vomiting, or is having seizures, take the pet to a veterinarian as soon as possible.

Possible health effects

- Headache
- Fever
- Diarrhea
- Stomach pain
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Muscle weakness
- Skin irritation/itching
- Eye irritation
- Allergic reactions

Stomach effects may begin within 3-5 hours and last for 1-2 days. Skin irritation may occur if you waded or swim in contaminated water.



What should I do if

I come in contact with cyanobacteria?

Call the Utah Poison Control Center at 800-222-1222 if you have been exposed to a potentially harmful algal bloom, or if you have any questions or concerns. If water containing cyanobacteria gets on your skin, wash the area with soap and water.

How do I report a bloom?

Report suspected algal blooms to the Utah Department of Environmental Quality's 24-hour response line at 801-536-4123.

What about recreational activities on lakes experiencing an algal bloom?

Do not swim or waterski in lakes where a bloom is occurring and avoid areas of scum when boating. Comply with posted health advisories. Recreationists can still enjoy activities like camping and picnicking at lakes and reservoirs experiencing blooms.

How likely am I to drink water with cyanobacteria toxins?

Water treated by a public water system is safe for drinking and showering. If this water should become unsafe, your water system will issue an alert. If you use an untreated water supply and live near a lake with known algae contamination, call your local health department for information.

Can I treat the water myself?

No. Boiling water, for example, does not remove the toxins; instead, it breaks the cell wall and releases more toxins into the water. Do not use contaminated water for washing clothes, doing dishes, bathing, or showering.

Can I eat fish from contaminated water?

If you choose to eat fish caught in affected waters, remove the fat, skin, and organs before eating and wash very well with fresh water.

Can I irrigate my crops or water my livestock with water from a bloom?

Contact the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food at 801-538-7100 or visit their website at ag.utah.gov/harmful-algal-blooms.html for more information.

Where can I get additional information about algal blooms?

- habs.utah.gov
- health.utah.gov/enviroepi/appletree/HAB/
- utahpoisoncontrol.org

